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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the client assessment package being used in the Philadelphia Urban Saturation Work Program and discusses some of the issues that should be considered in designing and implementing employability assessment components of welfare-employment programs. The original objectives of the assessment component were the following: (1) to conduct an initial screen test to identify clients who are immediately job ready; and (2) to measure the competency levels, interests, and service needs of those who are not job ready. The assessment package has the following parts: (1) job readiness determination; (2) social services needs checklist; and (3) a written assessment test, which tests reading ability, mathematics ability, job search knowledge, and occupational interests. The benefits of a well designed assessment that is integrated with other parts of the welfare-employment system can be substantial--both to the program in terms of developing staff capabilities in case management and client assignment, and to the client in terms of establishing realistic personal goals. (BJV)

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# ASSESSING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF WELFARE CLIENTS

BY

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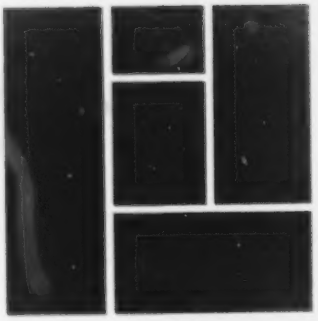

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# ASSESSING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF WELFARE CLIENTS

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MAY 1986

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Much research has been conducted on welfare-employment policy, including evaluations of program effectiveness, analysis of the determinants of welfare dependency, and identification of successful program operations and service delivery methods. Several studies of operations have been done, including a large one by The Urban Institute that examined the management and service delivery characteristics that differentiate high and low performing programs. Research shows that perhaps the weakest part of the work programs is client assessment. Common sense alone would suggest that a careful assessment of a client's employability, experience, interests and barriers is important if a program is to help an individual find and keep a job. Yet, for many reasons even the better programs fall short in this area.

This paper describes the client assessment being used in the Philadelphia Urban Saturation Work Program and discusses some of the issues that should be considered in designing and implementing employability assessment components. The assessment package was developed by The Urban Institute specifically for the Philadelphia project, which is one of two saturation demonstrations being funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services testing the feasibility of actively serving 75% of the WIN mandatory caseload. (The other demonstration is in San Diego, California.)

To "saturate" the caseload, a program must be designed to serve large numbers of clients. This greatly increases the staff/client ratio, paperwork, client tracking and reporting. The saturation nature of the Philadelphia demonstration posed several constraints within which the assessment was designed. First, the state welfare department determined that some type of

assessment was to be conducted for all program participants to improve the assignment of clients to subsequent training, jobs or services. Second, the assessment was to be conducted in a group setting, with about twenty clients per group. The group design was chosen to minimize the amount of staff time needed per client. Third, the entire assessment instrument had to be administered in forty-five minutes or less; again to allow rapid processing of large numbers of clients. Fourth, the agency specifically wanted the assessment to include reading and math levels, identification of social service needs, documentation of functional literacy functional literacy and a summary of the client's occupational interests. Finally, the entire component had to be designed very quickly to coincide with the planning and start-up of the Saturation Demonstration.

The original objectives of the assessment component were (1) to conduct an initial screen to identify clients who are immediately job ready, and (2) for those who are not job ready, measure competency levels, interests and service needs.

Thus, the state had very strict requirements for the assessment, which had important implications for the type of assessment we developed. Obviously, a detailed, standardized test of the type normally administered by the education system could not be used; traditional tests of precise reading and math levels often take several hours to administer. Similarly, because the entire component had to be developed and pre-tested within a few months, a new test could not be developed; rather, existing instruments had to be adapted.

The assessment package has three parts:

(1) job readiness determination,
(2) social services needs checklist, and
(3) the written assessment test, which is the major part of the package.

## Job Readiness Determination

The job readiness determination is a "screen" to identify those clients who are probably immediately job ready and likely to be able to obtain jobs on their own. This is an important aspect of the saturation concept; the program services are to be targetted on those who are least likely to obtain jobs on their own. (This is only one view of how work-welfare programs should target limited resources; other options include focusing on those who choose to participate, or on the most employable who will benefit quickly from minimal services.) Those clients determined to be employable must conduct independent job search for a three month period, periodically checking in with counselors who verify the job search.

The criteria for determining employability were developed jointly with state and local officials, and include screening clients on three dimensions: education level, employment history, and work skills. Table 1 describes the details of the Job Readiness Screen. The job ready determination in Philadelphia is done at registration, using information that is on the application form. The screen is just that -- a screen to identify those clients who probably can find a job on their own. It does not necessarily mean they all can find their own jobs, just that they have the education, steady recent work experience, and/or skills that should make their job search successful.

## Identification of Social Service Needs

The second part of the assessment is the identification of social service needs. This is performed by a counselor in an individual interview with each

Table 1
Pennsylvania Saturation Work Program
Job Readiness Screen

(THIS IS AN INITIAL SCREEN TO IDENTIFY CLIENTS WHO ARE IMMEDIATELY JOB READY)

Job Ready clients are those who:

Education (1) have completed at least ten years of schooling (i.e., completed 10th or 11th grade, graduated high school, attained a GED)

and

Employment (2) have been employed for at least 6 consecutive months over the past 24 months

or

Work Skills (3) have current specific work skills (e.g., typing, carpentry):

(a) if the skill was formally acquired through school, training or a job in the past five years; or

(b) if the client has used the skill in the past five years; or

(c) if the client is currently licensed or certified; and

(d) if the client reports being proficient, if that is relevant (e.g., typing speed over 40 wpm).

client. The intent is to quickly determine whether or not a lack of specific services will bar a client from direct entry into employment or training. This is a quick identification of need, and the Philadelphia program allows only about ten minutes per case. The staff person explains to the participant that they will look briefly at things which might affect the participant's ability to accept a job or take an active role in job search or training. If social service needs exist, the client is referred to a social services worker or to a special agency such as community mental health for more intensive assessment and service provision.

Eight potential areas of social service needs are listed on the Social Service Checklist:

- child care
- transportation
- housing
- drug/alcohol problems
- personal attributes
- legal problems
- health
- language barrier

The check list suggests indicators of possible potential problems in each of these eight areas. The indicators are not all-inclusive. In other words, the items are just probes for the caseworker to use to quickly decide whether the client can continue in the employment program. The form also allows the counselor to indicate whether there is a current problem, or whether a problem may arise in the future (e.g., pending surgery for the person who typically cares for the children).

Staff also identify the severity of the problem. If a client has only one barrier to employment (e.g., child care), that is not as serious a problem as having multiple problems (e.g., child care, plus drug problem, plus facing eviction, plus a hostile attitude).

## Written Assessment Test

The third and longest part of the assessment package is the written test which provides additional information on the client's skills, knowledge, and interests. The instrument has four sections:

Part A: Reading consists of 25 fill-in-the-blank sentences for which the client chooses the most appropriate response from a listed of four possible answers. The time limit for this section is 13 minutes.

Part B: Mathematics consists of 21 mathematical problems on addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, weights and measures, decimals, and percentages. The time limit for this section is 19 minutes.

Part C: Job Search Knowledge tests the client's understanding of the world of work. There are 6 questions on topics such as reading want-ads and on-the-job procedures. The time limit for this section is 6 minutes.

Part D: Occupational Interests provides the client with the opportunity to express his/her level of interest in various types of jobs. The client indicates his/her job interests from a listing of 77 different job descriptions. There is no time limit for this section, but 10 minutes should be sufficient.

The written test was developed by adapting existing validated instruments. The reading and mathematics sections and grade level estimations are based on the Job Corps screening instruments that have been tested on thousands of Job Corps participants over the years. The Job Search Knowledge section is a modification of a very small portion of the Adult Performance Level Program, or APL. The Occupational Interest section is based on the U.S. Department of Labor Employment Service Interest Check List for Occupational Exploration.

The intent of the written test is to provide a quick screen of competency and an approximate grade level on reading and math. Given the time limits, this is not a full scale educational achievement test. Rather it is a tool for program staff to use to help direct clients to appropriate education and

training programs, workshops, or further testing and assessment (for example, psychological tests, learning disability diagnosis, vocational testing).

A major reason for wanting approximate grade levels is to help staff make better decisions about where to refer clients for training, especially those who might be appropriate for the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Most JTPA programs now test clients themselves since many training components require certain reading and/or math competency levels. By screening clients first, welfare programs improve their linkages with JTPA and avoid the trauma of clients being rejected.

## Program Experience and Implications

A primary result of a good assessment is that general case management and client assignment improve. The results of the assessment can be used by the counselor and client together to decide what choices or services might be appropriate. Staff in Philadelphia are using the instrument quite effectively in helping clients to better understand their own capabilities and have more realistic expectations about their options for the future. The assessment instrument itself becomes part of the client's work program case file and is available for reference by the client and staff. Different staff are interested in different portions of the assessment. Job developers, for example, are particularly interested in a client's work experience, skills, and occupational interests.

Adult education specialists indicate that one of the problems facing many adults who attempt to obtain a GED is test anxiety. In fact, the problem is so common that many GED instructors do not even give diagnostic tests until after several sessions. In Philadelphia, clients are told during their orientation

session that JTPA, some employers and GED programs will test them, and that by participating in the assessment, they will get the opportunity to brush up on, or develop, their test-taking skills.

The use of the package has also helped the state and local administrators refocus their work program in light of the capabilities of their clients. For example, the original Philadelphia plan had included a Job Club or workshop as a major component of the program. Given the very low reading levels of the clients (as discussed below), it was clear that many were not ready to participate in a structured workshop. The program increased its focus, therefore, on identifying the appropriate remedial programs and referring clients to a centralized literacy council operated by the Mayor's office.

Some very preliminary information from the Saturation demonstration strongly indicates that the competency levels of the work-welfare clients are extremely low. It is important to note that the Saturation program, as part of the state's WIN single agency demonstration, is serving WIN mandatory clients, those AFDC recipients with no children under six years of age. Also, for the first few months, only those determined to be not immediately job ready were tested (now, though, all clients are being tested to allow further analysis and comparison). About twenty percent of the WIN mandatory clients were determined to be job ready; eighty percent were considered not job ready.

Most of the Philadelphia non-job ready participants are female (89%). The average age for these women is 36 years, and for non-job ready men, 21 years. On average, they completed ten years of education, and 26% had a high school diploma or GED. The competency levels were considerably lower than the educational level would suggest, however. The average approximate reading score was at the fifth or sixth grade level, and about 18% were reading below

the fourth grade level (which is often considered to be functionally illiterate). The competency in mathematics was even lower. The average math score was below the 4th grade level; in fact 72% of those tested scored below the 4th grade.

The implications of this low competency level are significant. Most JTPA programs require at least 6th grade reading and math levels, but, based on the Philadelphia results, only forty to fifty percent of the WIN mandatory clients would qualify on the basis of reading, and at least ninety percent would not meet the math requirements. Similarly, GED class materials in Pennsylvania and other states assume the students are functioning at the 7.5 to 8 grade level, and the test itself is based on an 8.5 to 9 grade level competency. The early Philadelphia results suggest that perhaps fewer than five percent of the non-job ready clients could handle the GED classes.

It was very evident in Philadelphia that the program had to consider broader remedial education opportunities if one assumes that a high school education or GED is a desirable objective to help these clients become employed and achieve long-term self-sufficiency. It is easy to understand why the program staff shifted direction to increase their clients' competency levels. Although there is strong indication that increasing education by even one grade level does lead to increases in employment and lifetime earnings, it is not clear whether work-welfare programs should emphasize educational remediation before employment and training services are provided. Some individuals may not succeed in an educational component; others may require several years of tutoring to become literate. A more sensible and comprehensive approach would be to combine remedial education with employment or vocational training, and focus on helping the client to upgrade his/her skills with an aim toward future earnings.

Perhaps the most critical requirement for an effective assessment is that the component be developed within the local community context. In Philadelphia, we spoke to administrators and staff in every agency, organization and institution which might possibly receive client referrals from the Saturation program. This included talking to JTPA about their entry requirements, to the ES about what types of individuals they felt they could help the most, to vocational rehabilitation about their eligibility requirements, to adult education about the different types of remedial programs. Each community will have a unique set of resources and network of agencies that become part of the assessment package; no one package will be appropriate for all programs.

Developing an assessment component is not simple, but its inclusion in a comprehensive employment program is essential. The benefits of a well-designed assessment that is integrated with other parts of the welfare-employment system can be substantial--both to the program in terms of developing staff capabilities in case management and client assignment, and to the client in terms of establishing realistic personal goals.